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SUBJECT: REPORT FROM THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS: OBSERVATIONS ON ETHNIC
MINORITY INTERVIEWS

REF: HCMC 599; B) HCMC 395; C) HCMC 29; D) 05 HCMC 1217

HO CHI MIN 00001028 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Interviews in HCMC with thirteen ethnic minority families from Gia Lai seeking to join family members in the U.S. revealed no pattern of discrimination or harassment. Interviews suggested continued incremental improvement in living conditions and religious freedom in Gia Lai, although authorities maintain a heavy police presence in at least some villages. The interviews also called into question the claims of persecution provided by some "anchors" already in the US in their applications for refugee status. Other beneficiaries seemed to be affiliated with the ethnic minority "Dega movement," whose goal is the creation of a separate or autonomous ethnic minority entity in the Central Highlands. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On August 29-31, ConGenoffs met in private with thirteen VISAS-93 applicants and their families in HCMC. (Sixteen VISAS-93 interviews were scheduled, but three sets of applicants failed to show.) The applicants were all ethnic Jarai, with the exception of one ethnic Banar family. All were from the Central Highlands province of Gia Lai. As with past interviews (reftels), applicants were assured of the confidentiality of their answers.

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Conditions in the Villages

¶3. (SBU) All but two of the families reported that their villages and homes are connected to the electric grid. All were farmers. Some had significant land holdings -- upwards of 15 acres -- although most had modest farms of one half to two acres. One beneficiary reported that her family had no land. The great majority of the adult beneficiaries were uneducated or had received very minimal schooling. Most of the applicants said their children were enrolled in school. However, among those who claimed to be in school, very few spoke or understood Vietnamese; some could not express their age or grade. At least three families had school-age children who were not enrolled in school.

¶4. (SBU) Roughly half of the applicants acknowledged receiving at least some standard assistance from the government, such as rice, salt or cooking oil. One applicant reported that the government is in the process of building houses in the village for members of the ethnic minority community, but not for her family. Some applicants said that their families were above the local income threshold to receive government aid (presumably because of family remittances from the U.S.).

¶5. (SBU) The ethnic makeup of villages, government and local police varied. Some reported that their villages were homogeneous ethnic minority, although local government officials were ethnic Vietnamese. Other villages were ethnically mixed with some ethnic minority representation among local government and police officials. It appeared that the two families whose villages did not have electricity also did not have indoor plumbing and were lived in ethnically segregated villages.

¶6. (SBU) Three of the 13 families reported a heavy police presence in their hamlets. None of the families reported any recent police harassment. All families had been visited by police immediately after their spouses fled to Cambodia. Some applicants reported that they had been visited by police a handful of times within a few months of their spouse's cross border flight; they were questioned about the petitioner's whereabouts and why he or she left. Two applicants reported that they were detained by police for fifteen and eight days respectively because they tried to "leave to find their spouse." Neither reported any physical abuse while in detention.

Contact with Family in the United States

¶7. (SBU) All the applicants said they receive remittances from their spouses in the United States. None of the families reported interference or harassment from local authorities in receiving the money. A few reported monthly remittances ranging from USD 100 to 300. Others claimed to receive remittances sporadically, ranging from USD 100 to 600 at a time. Some applicants traveled to the closest bank to receive the funds, others had the funds delivered by courier from Pleiku, the provincial capital.

¶8. (SBU) All the applicants noted that they spoke regularly with family in the United States. Some used their own phones, some cell phones of other family members. Neither they, nor their relatives, faced police harassment or questioning after making these calls. Frequency of telephonic contact varied from biweekly to bimonthly. Many of the applicants told us that they

HO CHI MIN 00001028 002.2 OF 002

had spoken with their families in the United States immediately prior to their interviews with Consulate staff in HCMC.

¶9. (SBU) None of the applicants had to seek permission to travel to HCMC for their prescreening and DHS interviews. None reported police harassment or official obstruction with the passport application process or in obtaining civil documents. They said they did not have to pay bribes to receive or process their documents.

¶10. (SBU) Most applicants said that conditions for religious practice had improved in Gia Lai; all those affiliated with the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) were able to practice in groups in homes or to gather in village meeting points. Two applicants who claimed affiliation with the "Dega Protestant Church" said that they were not allowed to gather, but SECV members in the village faced no restriction.

Some Questionable Stories

¶11. (SBU) In some cases, there appears to be significant inconsistencies between the accounts petitioners had given in Cambodia and those of the beneficiaries in Vietnam. For example, one petitioner from Chu Se District in Gia Lai had told interviewers in Cambodia that he was a tour guide who lost his job and faced arrest because of his participation in anti-GVN protests. He also claimed that he was prevented from practicing his Protestant faith. His wife told us that he was a landless woodcutter, who never was harassed or participated in protests before his flight to Cambodia. She and her family are practicing Catholics. Before her interview in HCMC, her husband in the United States called her to instruct that she should

state that the "Dega religion is the truth." She told us that this was the first time she had heard the term Dega; she did not know what it meant. (Note: Dega refers to the ethnic minority separatist/autonomy movement in the Central Highlands. End Note.)

¶12. (SBU) A second case involved a VISAS-93 refugee claim that family land had been confiscated by government and that the family had been persecuted for its Protestant beliefs. In our interview, the wife noted that their family had received two hectares (five acres) of rubber plantation from the government. She also said that the family had not been harassed by authorities prior to her husband's flight. She too was instructed by her husband to say that she belonged to the "Dega Church" in a phone conversation immediately before her interview.

¶13. (SBU) A few cases appeared to have more credible claims of participation in the Dega movement. One interviewee supported her husband's claims Cambodia to have been a local associate of Kok Ksor (President of the South Carolina-based Montagnard Foundation). The husband had claimed that he had been under police threat after he helped organize anti-GVN protests. The interviewee said that she was a member of the Dega church. However, after he husband's flight to Cambodia she had not been harassed by police and had been able to communicate with her husband and receive money from him regularly. In another case, the wife confirmed her husband's claim that he had participated in anti-GVN protests in April 2004 and that both she and he subsequently faced possible arrest. She said her husband was affiliated with the "Dega Protestant Church," but had no specific awareness of the religious tenets of the Church.

¶14. (SBU) Comment: The responses of the thirteen families interviewed reinforce our previous findings that very few VISAS-93 applicants face significant harassment. (One applicant noted that she would be sad to leave Vietnam, but had to follow her husband.) As in previous rounds of interviews, there were inconsistencies between the applicants' responses and statements that had been made by petitioners during the refugee-seeking process. Some interviewees acknowledged being coached by their husbands in the United States prior to their interviews by ConGen staff. Our interviews suggest that at least some of the anchors had not faced a specific threat of persecution or prosecution in Vietnam and had embellished their stories for the purpose of immigrating to the United States. However, others did appear to be affiliated with the ethnic minority "Dega movement," whose goal appears to be the creation of a separate ethnic minority entity in the Central Highlands. These individuals would be potential targets for Vietnamese security authorities because of their political and separatist activities, not their religious beliefs. End Comment.
Winnick